Love of Country
Amos 7:10-17
Acts 5:12-29
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I would begin by relating three brief stories which demonstrate the dimensions of our topic this morning: Love of Country.

The time is 750 B.C. Jeroboam II was King of Israel, reigning in a rare era of peace and prosperity. Israel's enemies were occupied with domestic problems and the Kingdom was free to develop its resources and turn its attention to matters other than survival. But all was not well with Israel. The rich were exploiting the poor: religion was very popular but quite ineffective in terms of justice and fair play: the affluent wiled away the hours in lavish living.

One man dared to speak. Amos was his name and he addressed his people out of a deep love for the nation and a deep conviction that Israel's future was dependent on her willingness to obey the moral laws of God. But, predictably, when he spoke the King, the priests and many of the people didn't like what they heard. In fact, the priest of Bethel, a man by the name of Amaziah told Jeroboam the King, "Amos is conspiring against you . . . the country cannot hear what he is saying." And to Amos, himself, Amaziah said, "Be off, you seer! Off with you to Judah! You can earn your living and do your prophecying there. But never prophecy again at Bethel, for this is the King's sanctuary." That is, Amaziah, had he owned an automobile, would have attached a bumper sticker declaring "Israel: Love it or leave it."

That's the first story. The second takes place 800 years later in Jerusalem. The powers in authority were Roman. The day to day rulers of the people were Jews who collaborated with the Romans. A man by the name of Simon Peter got himself arrested for preaching and teaching something about the sovereignty of Jesus Christ. The case was very clear. The government issued an injunction. Peter was ordered to stop, on the grounds that what he was saying was subversive to the constituted authorities and treasonous to the

legitimate government. Peter was incarcerated a second time and the high priest confronted him with his crime: "We expressly ordered you to desist from teaching in that name: and what has happened? You have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you are trying to make us responsible for that man's death." To which Peter replied with characteristic bluntness: "We must obey God rather than men."

That is the second story. Amos was exiled. Peter was flogged for that particular infraction, but the issue is the same. To whom does one owe ultimate allegience, and can one be loyal to nation while at the same in opposition to and disobedient of the constituted authorities of that nation?

The third vignette is a bit broader in scope. The time is the second half of the 18th century: the place - Great Britain's colonies in the New World. The majority of people who braved the wilderness of the New World were Calvinists and Presbyterian. They didn't like monarchy or totalitarianism of any form: they didn't like taxation without representation: they didn't like the state infringing on their right to worship as they pleased: in fact, they were adamantly opposed to any government which presumed to dictate the content of their conscience. "That", they affirmed, "belongs to God." In far away England, where a few skirmishes in the year 1776 were not even newsworthy, the affair was officially dubbed "The Presbyterian Revolt." And in that same year, a Dr. Ingles, rector of the Anglican Trinity Church in New York, wrote in his diary one of my favorite historical observations. "I do not know one Presbyterian minister, nor have I been able, after strict inquiry, to hear of any who did not by preaching and every effort in their power promote all the measures of the Continental Congress, however extravagant." [A Brief HIstory of the Presbyterians, L. A. Loetscher]

Those three illustrations from history deliniate the issue involved in the topic, "Love of Country". Can a man be a patriot and at the same time be faithful to his God? Can a man give allegience to nation while reserving ultimate allegience to God, the Lord of conscience? Can a man love his

country so much that he disobeys the constituted authorities because he is convinced they are acting wrongly? It is no easy issue, and in a sense it has been the cause of the deepest soul searching by men of good will since time began.

How it is resolved, of course, depends on how you define patriotism, or love of country. And it is both the uniqueness and greatness of our nation that the definition is written into the system: the Declaration of Independence: the Constitution: the Bill of Rights: and the continuing process by which the courts of the land define and redefine the law.

The American experiment, you see, was initiated on the basis of some fundamental assumptions about the nature of man individually, and corporately in the body politic. It is assumed, for instance, that the individual man is important; that he has inherent worth and dignity: that he was created to be free. The documents express it in terms of "certain unalienable rights" such as "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." History taught the founders of the Republic that governments, inevitably, infringe on those rights: that political systems, invariably usurp individual rights rather than protect them. And so they created a new system, based on the assumption that the rights of the individual will forever be protected in this land.

The second assumption, is that while men were created to be free, they are also hopeless egotists. Therefore, government needs always to contain restraints and checks and balances so that men do not have the opportunity to exploit and use other men.

The third assumption is that a man's conscience is sacred, and that no earthly authority has the right to dictate the content of a man's conscience. In terms of religion, it meant that the state would support not particular religion: that people would be free to be religious or not religious when and how and to the degree they please. In terms of the common life, it meant that men would be free to disagree with their government: free to live here

and enjoy the rights and privileges of the nation, even if they didn't love it: free to oppose the constituted authorities so long as they did not advocate violent overthrow of the system.

Those assumptions - which, by the way, are very dear to the heart of Presbyterianism - are both the uniqueness and greatness of our nation. The trouble is, that we don't always understand that, and many people who do understand it, don't appear to agree with it. The founding fathers were correct: the thread of liberty is frail indeed and the American system is always in danger of becoming something other than they intended it at the hands of men who don't understand or don't buy the fundamental assumptions. The super-patriot, for instance, who advocates putting all war-dissenters in jail, and bombing North Vietnam back to the stone age, as a matter of national honor, may be spouting some very popular rhetoric, but he is also engaging in un-Americanism, at the most profound level.

History teaches us that patriotism is at once one of man's noblest emotions, and also one of his most dangerous and destructive. When patriotism becomes nationalsim, as it often does, it evolves into an extension of our individual egocentricity. You and I have a deeply felt need to be number one, to build a little world with self at the center, to regard others as instruments to be used for our own gratification. We Presbyterians call that original sin. Extreme nationalism feeds on it and appeals to it. Early in our history it led us to a doctrine called "Manifest Destiny", which in the vernacular meant "the only good Indian is a dead Indian". In Germany it was famed by the rhetoric of Nazies that - Germanic people were better and had more rights and were, in fact, entitled to rule the world. It shows its head regularly in conversations about our own posture in international relations, whenever someone advocates that we have the right and responsibility to tell another people how to order their life.

In a recent article Saturday Review on Psychiatry and the Survival of Man [S.R. 5/22/71] the author maintained that patriotism which turns the

cornor into extreme nationalism is one of the three major problems that must be resolved if mankind is to survive. He put it succinctly: "If man is to have a future on this shrinking globe, the values of 'One World' and the 'Family of Man' will have to supplant the ethnocentric biases and suspicions that now set nation against nation and race against race."

We are in a time when the appeal of nationalism is very strong. As we learn more and more about the duplicity and deception that led us into the Asian war we want very badly not to face the truth, to be assured that our country was and is right. And one very easy way to avoid the pain of honesty is to shut out the truth and talk about preserving national honor, and rant and rave about the greatest power on earth backing away from a band of committed Vietnamese. That's destructive nationalism which, we of all people, ought to oppose. But most of all, it is not really an expression of love for one's country - as that country was intended to be.

Can a Christian be a patriot? Can a man who has given his ultimate allegience to Jesus Christ, maintain a loyalty to his nation?

My answer to that question is affirmative, wholeheartedly affirmative. And I believe we not only can - but should - love our nation in three precise ways.

First, I think we can love our country by appreciation and gratitude for what is good about America. I don't think we have to be defensive about it or apologetic for it. I think we can look at what this nation means and what it has done and what it is, and be grateful. I think we can look at the standard of living engendered by our system and be proud. I think we can and ought to get up in the morning to begin a new day in a land where freedom means I can live without fear, and be thankful. I think we can travel the length and breadth of this incredible land and give passionate thanks for its beauty and strength. I think we can go downtown to a meeting of the city council, or pull the lever on the voting machine and offer a prayer of passionate appreciation. I think we can look into the past and shed tears

of gratitude for the nobility and self sacrifice of those who made this experiment work. For me it is the memory of John Calvin McCormick, for whom I was named and who died on Saipan, and Frank Arndt Buchanan who died in Normandy. I'm grateful for that and for what that means and I'm one of those who starts out singing the national anthem but has difficulty making it all the way through without that memory and many others filling my eyes with tears. There is much that is great and good about America, and love of country means being grateful for it. But that is not all.

Love of country means support of and participation in the political processes by which its decisions are made and its course steered. I have very little patience with the myth that the system will work apart from the participation of people. I put little credence in that love of country that is neglected on election day, or during the campaign, or that dismisses politics as dirty business and all politicians as opportunists. Love of country means bearing responsibility for it. Robert F. Kennedy said it eloquently: "If we fail to dare, if we do not try, the next generation will harvest the fruit of our apathy - a world we did not want - a world we did not chose - but a world we could have made better, by caring for the results of our labors. And we shall be left only with the hollow apology of T. S. Eliot; 'This is not what I meant at all. This is not it at all.' I know that you do not mean to leave this kind of world to your children. But if you do not care, who will."

Love of country means caring to the degree of involvement. Finally, it means a love mature and deep enough to be critical. It means the ability to see what should be and then speak out when we fall short. It means knowing and feeling words like justice and freedom and then expressing indignant anger when they are ignored. It means loving the promise and potential of America, and then working for change when the promises are broken and the potential unrealized.

Plato once said, "A life without criticism is not worth living." So

it is with our nation. To love it is to acknowledge its failures: to look at the truth honestly: to know and to feel that our infant mortality rate is tragically high: that we lead the world in crimes of robbery, rape and assault: that a young black girl was shot down on the street of a Southern town: that we are unwilling to tax ourselves for better education and to end poverty while at the same time pouring billions of dollars into the weapons of war. To love America is to take its problems seriously. To be a patriotic American is to avoid the simple-mindedness of nationalsim and deal critically with the problems that are knocking at our doors.

So let us love our land: and as we celebrate its birth and formation let us recall that our ultimate allegience is to Jesus Christ alone - and that the freedom for that allegience is part of what it means to be an American. Let us love our country, not in a blind allegience, but gratefully, actively, and critically: let us love with a love that wants the nation to be more than it is: a love that sees the vision - that dream - the potential. A love that is thankful, vigorous and tough.

That, I would suggest - is Christian patriotism.

Amen.

Our father, you are the Lord of all men and all nations, and we presume no favoritism as citizens of this land. We are grateful for our country. Grant us conviction to work for its ideals: to affirm its goals: and to work for the realization of its fondest dreams: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.